

*This is the foreword to the Conference Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Coma and Consciousness, Salerno, Italy, 4-7 July 2010*

## What a human being is

*Let us remember — since such are the facts — that ‘bio-ethics’ and the State’s obsession with euthanasia were explicit categories of Nazism. Fundamentally, Nazism was a thoroughgoing ethics of life. It had its own concept of ‘dignified life’, and it accepted, implacably, the necessity of putting an end to undignified lives.* Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001)

There are times in life when even a philosopher will have to ask herself: What is a human being? Even we who have conceptualized morality, even we who have presumed we have the right to ask: what is virtue, what is justice, even before asking, even before having understood, what a human being is, even we should stop and try to understand of whom we are talking and what this being is capable of bearing.<sup>1</sup>

To ask and answer this question is a necessary requirement for the avowal of any ethical position on the dignity of human life, and thus for the constitution of any so-called bio-ethical commission which pretends to be entrusted with the responsibility of defining what neurological states together with what ostensible behaviour underpin a dignified human life.

The outcome of such an assessment must be nothing less than the key to our happiness. Since we pretend to define in this way the minimum requirement for a dignified human life, we must presume we are able to find the necessary requirements for the definition of human happiness. We cannot stop short of that in our pursuit of an answer to the question, because “dignity”, it is believed, is what we need to be human and therefore to be able to bear a human life and thus to be happy. For what is happiness if not the fulfilment of one’s essence and therefore of one’s humanity? And is this dignity not the necessary and sufficient requirement for the fulfilment of our essence as human beings? So a human life to be defined as such has to be dignified and to be dignified means ultimately to fulfil one’s essence. This is a definition of happiness, but so far we have not answered the question but only moved in a circle. The reason for this is that we are dealing with a badly posed problem. For the first move is to understand what it means to be human, not what it is to be a “dignified” human being, or what is a self-justified human life, because this already presumes an individual perspective on the “minimum requirement” for being human: dignity in this case, for which we are presuming a general agreement. It is what in philosophy is called *petitio principii* or begging the question.

In all honesty the only answer I can find to the question: “What is a human being?” is the Terentian adage:

*Homo sum, nihil humani a me alienum puto.*

I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.

Nothing of what can happen to a human being is foreign to me and makes me less human. Thus, neither happiness nor dignity is the definition of what a human life should be, but human life itself, for as long as it is recognized as such and cared for as such. Every other definition is and expresses the superfluous.

In fact, where would we stop in the search for a criterion of what is a dignified and thus self-justified and bearable human life? What would suffice for the criterion of dignity? This is the murky ground where the search for a “good death” opens the floodgates to eugenics and thus to an unrestrained hedonism. In fact, the gates are already wide open in the Western world and that is what explains these enquiries and pseudo-debates. The real challenge now, for both scientists and philosophers, should be to contain the flood, by showing the fallacy behind such presumptuous enquiries. In this the honesty of the scientist is more urgently needed than that of the philosopher because for better or for worse in our technocratic culture the person in the street looks to scientific knowledge for ultimate answers. The scientist should have both the intelligence and the honesty to admit that there is no criterion for “dignified” human life, other than our Western concept of happiness which is disgusted by what is less than beautiful and perfect (where is the room in our culture for a slow death or old age, for example?).

<sup>1</sup> Papa-Grimaldi, Alba (2010) *Orphans of the One or the Deception of the Immanence: Essays on the Roots of Secularization* (Peter Lang - Berner Reihe philosophischer Studien).

Therefore, we should now ask: Is there really a criterion which comes to our aid from science — a theoretical and thus absolute, self-evident knowledge — that can sustain us in our decision on what kind of life is justifiable as human? What categories can be invoked to define such criteria? Are they neurological, psychological or rather purely hedonistic? Nowadays the media — and the confusion that always ensues when serious scientific research is banalized by an information source which seeks, first and foremost, to impress the public and keep it in that state of semi-consciousness that allows indoctrination and dependence on media information — are enforcing on us the belief that we have the support of the neurological sciences in establishing such criteria for a “dignified life”. But can any serious scientist believe that there is now, or could ever emerge in the future, some theoretical knowledge on which everybody agrees, and which can thus substitute the moral choice based, as usual, on the individual situation, chance, the circumstances of life, the maze of the consciences, combined with a rigorous treatment of the clinical situation, as the ultimate judge of each and every life and death?

Thus, what is bio-ethics if not a doctrine that tries once again to reduce to theories that which cannot even be conceived outside the singularity of the pathos of each individual life?

Alba Papa-Grimaldi  
University of Legon, Ghana